

Make the Internet Work for You

by Bob Heidenreich

Here's a piece of cold, hard reality: It's gotten harder and harder for smaller deck builders to compete against larger operators and their more sophisticated marketing methods. I know. I've been building decks for more than 25 years and I've seen it firsthand. Today you not only have to build good, attractive decks for a reasonable price, you have to be an expert marketer as well. That means both understanding how the Internet works and making it work harder for you and your business.

One of the most important things a deck builder can do is develop a dynamic Web presence. The Internet is free. Consumers are going there to find information, and you can't afford to be missing when they're looking for a deck builder — a lot of deck builders have websites. Just “being on the Internet” isn't enough, though; a simple, static Web page doesn't do that much for you. You want to do things that get YOUR page noticed by the people who are looking, when they're looking.

Your Website

Let's start with the basics. Your Web pages have to convey a professional impression and must be easy to look at and easy to read. Don't splash bright colors on every page. Don't cram every inch full of words; it's okay to have some blank space.

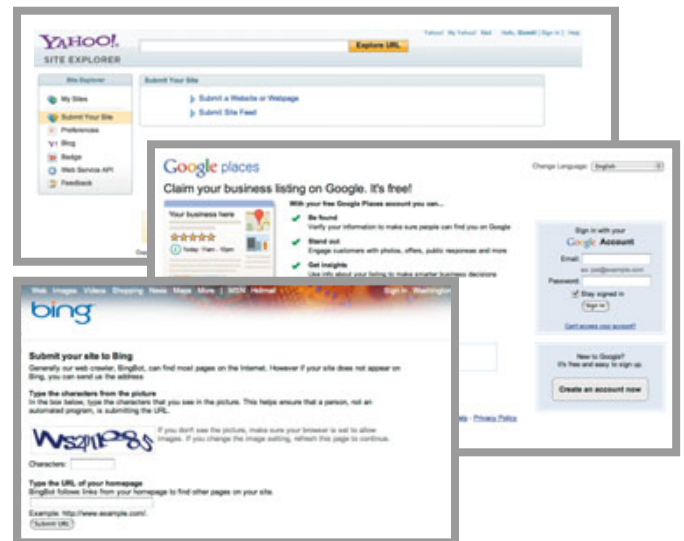
There's nothing wrong with a do-it-yourself website, and there are several good software programs that can help you build a reasonably robust, attractive site. One I like is from Intuit (intuit.com), the maker of QuickBooks. However, if you're not skilled with artistic endeavors, or you can't find the time to build a site, then pay someone to design a simple but professional page for you. It will be some of the best money you spend. If you think you'll save money by creating your own website, but you never actually get around to it, you haven't saved any money. In fact, you may have just put yourself out of business.

Use your website to advertise that you're great and you're an expert at building decks. Put as many shots of finished decks on the site as you can. Put your credentials on the site. If you specialize in multilevel decks, put that on your site. If you specialize in very small decks that make the most of a tiny footprint, put that out there. You might be surprised how detailed people can be when they're searching online.

Get Noticed

That brings us to the all-important search engines. There are a few fairly simple things you should do to be sure your website shows up when people search for deck builders online. These include learning about keywords and meta tags (the phrases search engines key into) and how to use them. You also need to get into social networking, including YouTube and Facebook. And finally, you need to understand what search engine optimization, or SEO, means, and how you can make it work to your advantage.

To make sure your website shows up when someone is looking for a deck builder in your geographic area, one of the first things you should do is go to Google.com — under Google Places on the main website — and register your business name with the site. It's free, and that way, Google knows that your site exists, and it knows what your correct



address, phone number, and other information are. Other search engines, like Bing and Yahoo, have similar setups. Do a little research; it can pay off big time.

I don't have room here to go into all the specifics of keywords and meta tags, but you can learn a lot about them by plugging “how to use meta tags” in any of the popular search engines (also see *Deck Ledger*, March/April 2009, at deckmagazine.com). Study the results, apply those lessons to your site, and watch the traffic increase.

Do make sure the meta tags and keywords on your site are

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relevant to what you're doing. If you build decks, don't talk about plumbing. Use words on your main page that clearly convey "I'm a deck builder in this city and I'm an expert."

Write a blog that's linked to your website and use it to offer advice or suggestions. It doesn't have to be complicated; it can be relatively short and to the point, but it needs to focus on a subject that a person might need help with as he or she considers a deck.

Let's say you write a blog on the pros and cons of different deck lighting choices. You're sharing specific expertise that makes you look like *the* expert on the subject to the outside world. You can write several months' worth of blogs at one time, and simply post a new one every month. There are a number of very good, very simple blogging sites on the Internet that make this process easy; Wordpress is one that comes to mind. Link the blog to your site, and you'll be surprised how much it helps your ranking with search engines.

Don't forget other simple things, like creating a Facebook account for your business, not just for you personally. You need a professional presence in the social networking world, especially with younger adults who've grown up in a world that's always had the Internet. If you're not online, you don't exist to this emerging market.

The Snowball Effect

Here's one last thought: As your website starts to get more hits — which means you're putting content on it that people are actually interested in — it will get a better rank with search engines. That will make it show up sooner in search results, which means it will get even more hits. It's kind of circular, but it works. ❖

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